### **Massachusetts Department of**

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

### 75 Pleasant Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148-4906 Telephone: (781) 338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Relay 1-800-439-2370

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | June 21, 2023 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools: SY2022-2023 Quarter 4 Reports |

This month, I am presenting the annual evaluation report for SY2022-2023 to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the three chronically underperforming schools and their implementation of their school turnaround plans. This report includes references to evidence provided in the three quarterly reports submitted earlier in this school year[[1]](#footnote-2) and incorporates information from the final school quality reviews conducted by the School Empowerment Network between May and June 2023.

**Chronically Underperforming Schools**

Three schools are currently designated as chronically underperforming: John P. Holland Elementary School (UP Academy Holland) and Paul A. Dever Elementary School (Dever) in Boston, and John Avery Parker Elementary School (Parker) in New Bedford.

**Paul A. Dever Elementary School, Boston**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1: Positive Learning Environment

*Description:*

Throughout the 2022-23 school year, Dever Elementary School (Dever) has maintained a consistently positive learning environment that reviewers cite as the school’s greatest strength. The school continues to utilize an approach to culture building, conflict resolution and social emotional support that is informed by an equity lens and builds strong relationships among stakeholders. The school has established systems and structures to uphold schoolwide expectations for positive relationships, and these relationships serve as the foundation for accelerated social-emotional and academic growth.

During the 2022-23 school year, Dever has expanded opportunities for families to be purposefully involved in the school community at both the classroom and schoolwide levels. For the first time, the school has invited parent volunteers to support classroom instruction. The school has communicated clear expectations for teachers to communicate with families and supported them with materials to make positive phone calls home. The families interviewed by reviewers noted this communication as a strength of the school. At the school level, the school has promoted opportunities for families to learn about available resources at school and in the community. Each Friday, the school opens its doors to families to attend weekly trainings and a parent café. The school’s parent council also has been more well attended than in the past, with families sharing that they feel their concerns or ideas are being taken into account and acted upon.

During the midyear school quality review, the review team recommended that Dever continue the equity professional development work that was begun at the outset of the year and make a concrete long-term plan for this work. Since that time, the school has contracted with an equity consulting partner and held an initial learning session with the newly reconstituted Instructional Leadership Team and administrative team. This work will continue through the summer and throughout the 2023-24 school year.

Area of Strength #2: Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description:*

In SY2022-23, Dever has developed its systems of teacher support and supervision into an area of strength, after this indicator of school quality was cited as an area for focused improvement at the end of the 2021-22 school year.

The leadership team, consisting of the school's principal, assistant principal, content coaches, and receiver, has continued to prioritize teacher support and supervision as a critical lever to drive change in the school, even as this team experienced multiple vacancies for most of the school year. School leaders have continued to refine the school’s Ignite Chunk Chew Review (ICCR) instructional model and the specificity of the expectations within that model. In this year’s educator evaluation cycle, teachers produced artifacts that were more strongly aligned with ICCR, indicating their increased understanding of the practices. Responding to feedback from the midyear school quality review, the receiver provided additional professional development to the school’s instructional coaches to strengthen their feedback skills, through shared classroom observations. Teachers also have engaged in grade-level learning walks to observe student discourse and identify practices to implement in their own classrooms.

The school’s observation cycles continuously inform the focus of the school’s weekly professional learning time. For example, data from a recent learning walk prompted school leaders to provide professional development around specific chunking strategies from the school’s literacy initiative. During the third school quality review visit, reviewers observed teachers implementing strategies that they had learned during the previous week’s professional development. Teachers shared that they appreciate the school’s shift towards providing them with concrete pedagogical strategies connected to observational feedback, and that leaders are providing them with time to develop the new tools and receive immediate feedback on their implementation.

It will be critical for the newly formed leadership team to continue to focus upon this lever. In addition to the work planned over the summer to calibrate leadership expectations for teacher support and supervision, the leadership team should regularly conduct shared classroom walkthroughs next year to continue calibrating instructional expectations and feedback to teachers.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1: Pedagogy

*Description:*

In the first school quality review of the 2022-23 school year, Dever’s rating in the indicator of Pedagogy reverted from “Proficient” to “Developing.” During the fall visit, reviewers noted the lack of student discourse across almost all classrooms. The leadership team responded to this feedback by focusing strongly on increasing student discourse for the remainder of the school year. As a result of this initiative, reviewers observed meaningful student discourse in many of the classrooms observed during the final school quality review of the year. During the spring visit, students were consistently working in partnerships or small groups across classrooms, and teachers supported the students’ discourse with tools such as sentence starters, word banks and assigned discussion roles. Most importantly, students were on task and engaged in meaningful discussions. It was clear to the review team that Dever teachers are prioritizing student discourse across content areas.

In SY2023-24, the school needs to turn its attention to developing teachers’ conferral practices, now that students are engaging in meaningful academic discussions. During the spring visit, reviewers observed inconsistency in teachers’ understandings of the purpose of conferral as well as wide gaps in their abilities to use conferrals to deepen and advance student thinking. In some classrooms, teachers missed opportunities to address students’ misconceptions, while in other classrooms teachers utilized a predetermined set of questions to ask each group without appropriately diagnosing each group’s learning needs in the moment.

Teachers’ implementation of the school’s pedagogical model continues to be uneven in both math and English Language Arts. It is important to note that the school has demonstrated stronger pedagogy in science instruction across all of the school quality visits this year, through more effective uses of inquiry, small group discussions, and teacher conferral and questioning. School leaders should leverage teachers’ strengths in inquiry-based science instruction when providing professional development in other content areas.

Area of Focus #2: Goals and Action Plans

*Description:*

At the end of SY2022-23, the school quality indicator of “Goals and Action Plans” has emerged as a recommended area of focus for Dever. This indicator emphasizes the importance of tracking the school’s progress against a short list of focused goals that are understood by all stakeholders in the school community. While the school has undertaken a significant amount of work to increase student discourse this year, it is not clear how the school is assessing the impact of this work. It is essential for the leadership team to analyze data on its priority goals for improvement on a schoolwide level, and also for teachers and grade-level teams to monitor their own progress toward schoolwide goals at the grade, classroom, and individual student levels. With a full leadership team now in place, Dever is in a stronger position to monitor its progress toward school improvement goals and make timely course corrections when the data reveal less than adequate progress or inequitable outcomes in certain areas. The school will need to implement effective protocols for using data across all critical team structures in order to improve student outcomes schoolwide.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1: Positive Learning Environment

*Description:*

Throughout the 2022-23 school year, UP Academy Holland (UAH) has maintained a consistently positive learning environment that reviewers cite as the school’s greatest strength. The school develops and continuously refines intentional structures to promote a positive, equitable, and inclusive school culture. Teachers engage in professional learning about diversity, equity, and inclusion and collaborative planning for social-emotional learning (SEL) during their weekly common planning times. The school’s Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) behavioral team consults with grade-level teams during their weekly SEL planning times. The school monitors SEL outcomes using a universal screening tool that is administered quarterly to assess student growth.

School leaders continue to advance the use of restorative practices that give students voice and choice in restorative conversations at all tiers of behavior support. The school’s student support procedures now prioritize students staying in class even when they make mistakes, teaching them how to repair and restore connections within their classroom communities.

During SY2022-23, UAH strengthened its systems of student support in the following ways:

* Piloted a new SEL curriculum in grades 2 and 5, with plans to expand to a schoolwide implementation in SY2023-24; and
* Increased the participation of MTSS behavioral team staff in grade-level team meetings, to improve communication between classroom educators and support staff.

Reflecting on the school’s success in developing a positive, equitable, and inclusive culture, students shared that there is deep respect between students and teachers and respect among peers. This feedback from students represents an improvement in school climate since the end of SY2021-22, when students spoke to reviewers about a lack of respect shown by some students toward teachers and peers. Similarly, parents expressed confidence that their children were well cared for by their teachers and that the school attends to the academic, social and emotional needs of their children when placing them with teachers. One parent interviewed by the review team specifically named the diversity of the students and staff as a strength of the school.

Area of Strength #2: High Expectations

*Description:*

In SY2022-23, UAH has developed its high expectations for student learning into an area of strength, after this indicator of school quality was cited as an area for focused improvement at the end of the 2021-22 school year. School leaders use a yearlong arc of professional development to communicate teacher expectations for teacher practice. The arc document and its associated rubric provide an accountability structure to continuously promote high expectations for staff.

The school’s progress in this area has been driven by improved communications with families. Families reported that their twice-yearly parent-teacher conferences provide them with a clear understanding of the strengths and areas of growth for their children, along with resources to support their children’s learning at home. All parents interviewed by the review team agreed that their communications with the school have improved this year. The ongoing communication underscores the high expectations the school has for students and the partnership they seek from families as they hold students to high expectations.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1: Curriculum

*Description:*

In SY2022-23, the school’s curriculum remains an area of focus for UAH. At the end of the previous school year, the school’s quality review revealed that teachers were not yet able to consistently engage students in the the curriculum in ways that give them rigorous thinking opportunities. During the final quality review of SY2022-23, school leaders shared that grade-level teams meet four times a week to review the main goals of a lesson, determine the lesson’s critical moments, and plan opportunities for student thinking. In the classrooms observed, however, the actual selection of critical momentsand time spent on those portions of the lesson varied across classrooms.

Throughout the school quality reviews this school year, the review team also noted a need for teachers to provide differentiated supports within each portion of the lesson to keep all learners productively engaged in rigorous and sustained grade-level thinking. In the majority of classrooms observed, all students were engaged in the same work, including instances where all students were provided with scaffolds that some students did not need. Ensuring that all learners have access to the curriculum through differentiated supports continues to be a priority for improvement moving forward.

Area of Focus #2: Pedagogy

*Description:*

In SY2022-23, leaders and teachers at UAH have shared a clear vision for how students learn best and connected that vision to specific teacher actions. Teachers described the school’s current work on pedagogy as focusing on the critical moments of the lesson “where students do the most thinking and we can encourage them to [dive deeply into the content] in speaking or sharing with a partner.” While there is a shared belief in how students learn best, the execution of the vision continues to be inconsistent across classrooms, as evidenced by uneven student participation and teacher expectations of high-quality work. School leaders need to continue to deepen the schoolwide understandings of the specific pedagogical moves and student actions that align to the school’s instructional vision.

Area of Focus #3: Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description:*

UAH has a clear and comprehensive system of teacher support and supervision that uses teacher observation data to drive professional development. Every teacher receives feedback from an administrator or coach at least once every two weeks, with some teachers receiving more frequent feedback. These feedback conversations are tracked in a shared data system, and school leaders analyze trends across classrooms to share with the faculty and plan for upcoming professional development activities.

In SY2022-23, school leaders introduced a new practice of reviewing videotaped lessons in individual coaching sessions with all teachers. Teachers typically bring student work to the coaching meetings to facilitate discussions of the impact of teaching strategies captured in the video.

While there is a clear system in place to ensure frequent classroom visits and feedback to individual teachers, the actual feedback being provided to teachers is not yet aligned to the level of student thinking targeted by the school’s instructional vision. During classroom observations conducted during the review, school leaders struggled to provide concrete feedback to teachers who were further along in mastering the school’s pedagogical expectations. School leaders need to further refine their own pedagogical expertise to expand the range of feedback they can provide within the current system of teacher support and supervision.

**John Avery Parker Elementary School, New Bedford**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1: Positive Learning Environment

*Description:*

Since the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, Parker Elementary (Parker) has advanced from a rating of “Proficient” to a rating of “Well Developed” in the indicator of Positive Learning Environment in the school quality review process. In the final review of SY2022-23, all stakeholders (students, families, and faculty) reported that the learning environment at Parker is safe, encouraging, and respectful. This culture is palpable in all Parker classrooms and common spaces. To ensure that students are known well at Parker, school leaders have developed clear structures for coordination of social-emotional supports, including the Whole Child Support Team (WCST). Teachers can refer children who are struggling to meet behavioral expectations to the WCST. Classroom teachers, special educators, the Manager of Educator Quality, school adjustment counselor, and parents collaborate in WCST meetings to design and monitor individualized intervention plans for students. Reviewers observed individualized social-emotional-behavioral supports being provided to students in classrooms across the school. All observed teachers used positive and encouraging language and tone to address their classes and individual students. Students across the school also demonstrated their knowledge of strategies to work productively in groups.

School leaders create regular opportunities for professional learning aligned to the desired school culture. For example, a number of staff members participated in a restorative practices book club this year. Additionally, the school engages all of its staff in content-related professional development to immerse them in the student learning expectations that support positive behaviors. As one school counselor described, “When I am in a classroom, it’s so important to know what they are teaching. [Off-culture] behaviors often come from [students] not being able to do the work and now I am able to better help [students] because I understand the approach.”

Area of Strength #2: Teacher Support & Supervision

*Description:*

Parker advanced from a rating of “Proficient” to a rating of “Well Developed” in the indicator of Teacher Support and Supervision at the beginning of SY2022-23 and maintained this highest quality rating through the end of the school year. At Parker, school leaders’ support for teachers is consistently deep and robust. Teachers readily articulate the instructional and curricular approach at Parker and can identify instructional practices they are working to improve with the support of instructional leadership team members. Teachers also reported that the feedback they receive from regular classroom walkthrough observations connects directly to what they have learned in schoolwide professional development sessions and supports them as they work to apply their new learnings.

It is notable that in the short time between the second and third school quality review visits of SY2022-23, school leaders successfully implemented new strategies for supporting and supervising teachers. First, they made the school’s literacy professional development mandatory for all teachers and support staff. In addition to strengthening the social-emotional-behavioral supports for students as noted earlier, the inclusion of all teachers in the school’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) trainings has enabled SFL practices to spread to other content areas such as math and science. As a result, staff buy-in and excitement for the literacy initiative continues to grow. Secondly, school leaders have expanded their use of Teacher Collaboration Time (TCT) to extend the learnings from schoolwide professional development. Whereas TCT in the past had been used exclusively for lesson planning, school leaders made this strategic adjustment to give teachers more time to plan to put into practice new learnings from professional development. This change also has supported strong teacher buy-in for Parker’s instructional approach. While teachers reported feeling challenged and excited about the work they are doing collectively, they did not express feeling overwhelmed by leaders’ expectations or the pace of learning. This is evidence of the quality of support they are receiving to carry out the leadership team’s new initiatives.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1: Pedagogy

*Description:*

Parker’s rating for the indicator of Pedagogy rose from “Developing” to “Proficient” in the middle of SY2021-22 and has stayed at this level throughout SY2022-23. In the final school quality review of this school year, reviewers found evidence of strong pedagogy that mirrors the instructional vision in multiple grade levels. At the same time, reviewers observed some unevenness in the implementation of practices in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math. This unevenness is to be expected given the number of newer teachers on the Parker staff this year. Both the ELA and math curricula at Parker are relatively complex pedagogical approaches that require teachers to acquire deep conceptual understandings and skillful facilitation moves to accelerate students’ progress in their collaborative learning activities. It is expected that newer teachers will need more support and experience to be able to carry out Parker curricula with a high degree of effectiveness.

In all ELA and math classrooms observed, students engaged with complex tasks. In all math classrooms, students participated in math congresses. Across the math classrooms observed, reviewers found more evidence of teachers conferring with students about content and strategy and teachers collecting data on students’ conceptual learning, as compared to previous school quality reviews. In both ELA and math classrooms, however, reviewers noted that teachers need more support around their conferral practices. In some classrooms teachers spent too much time in certain conferrals, leaving other students to wait for needed support. In other classrooms, teachers missed opportunities to clear up student misconceptions, or they failed to listen carefully to student thinking before jumping in to redirect and/or provide the correct response to students.

To move pedagogy forward and continue to develop teachers, school leaders should thoughtfully leverage model classrooms where the instructional vision is being met. School leaders have identified teachers who are demonstrating mastery of ELA and math pedagogical practices and are considering various strategies to leverage their expertise, including filming classroom videos or inviting teacher teams to deliver professional development. In addition, Parker leaders should continue to develop the practice of conferral schoolwide. In this effort, it will be important for leaders to avoid overwhelming teachers and instead to mirror what Parker leaders ask teachers to do with students: watch teachers carefully in their practice, listen in to their conferrals, take time to diagnose strengths and challenges, and provide differentiated scaffolds, models, and coaching.

Area of Focus #2: Assessment

*Description:*

Parker’s rating for the indicator of Assessment rose from “Developing” to “Proficient” in the middle of SY2021-22 and has stayed at this level throughout SY2022-23. In the final school quality review of this school year, reviewers noted that Parker has made significant progress in two components of this indicator, namely the ongoing use of valid assessment measures and analyzing the information gathered from assessments. School leaders have built and maintained a robust data hub that includes both academic assessment information and data on student social-emotional learning. Teachers regularly input data from common assessments into the data hub. During Teacher Collaboration Time (TCT), teachers analyze data and use that data to inform student groupings and interventions. School leaders and coaches also use the data hub to identify schoolwide trends in student progress.

A third component of the Assessment indicator remains an area of focus for Parker: the use of assessment data to adjust instructional decisions in ways that produce more equitable student outcomes. In SY2022-23, interim student data has not yet shown the growth desired by school leaders and teachers. While school leaders have developed action plans for improving outcomes in areas where there has been less than adequate growth, leaders also must build the capacity of teachers and teams to identify the root causes of learning gaps evidenced in the data. Teachers and teams must plan effective instructional responses to what students are showing in their work, in their discussions, and on their assessments.

1. The first three quarterly reports for SY2022-2023 can be found here:

   Q1 report: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2023/2022-10/item7.docx>

   Q2 report: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2023/2023-01/item7.docx>

   Q3 report:

   <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2023/2023-03/item5.docx> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)